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AUTHOR Elliott, Nikki; Harriman, Carol
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ABSTRACT

The possibility of using portfolios as a placement tool for freshman English at the University of Nevada (Reno) was studied. Three university instructors who, among them, taught all 3 levels of freshman English, from remedial (English 001) to accelerated (English 102), read portfolios assembled for 58 students in 3 college-bound high school senior English classes. Two readers read each portfolio independently, and discrepantly scored portfolios were read by the third instructor. Correlations between readers' portfolio placements and traditional placements based on American College Testing Program (ACT) scores was high, particularly for placing students in English 101, the mid-level and usual college freshman course. The ACT placement appeared accurate for three-fourths of the population, but the portfolios were better at detecting students who did not need special consideration in terms of remediation or acceleration. A follow-up study of student achievement in class is proposed as the best determinant of accuracy of placement. A table lists scoring comparisons for each student. (SLD)

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A FEASIBILITY STUDY OF THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS FOR PLACEMENT IN ENGLISH 001, ENGLISH 101, OR ENGLISH 102 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

NIKKI ELLIOTT
Nevada State Department of Education
Carson City, Nevada

CAROL HARRIMAN
Edward C. Reed High School
Washoe County School District
Reno, Nevada

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A FEASIBILITY STUDY OF THE USE OF PORTFOLIOS FOR PLACEMENT IN ENGLISH 001, ENGLISH 101, OR ENGLISH 102 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

by
Nikki Elliott
and
Carol Harriman

WHY WE UNDERTOOK THE STUDY

During the 1989-90 school year at Edward C. Reed High School, in Sparks, Nevada, we introduced our English students to the portfolio process--Carol to her senior English college-prep students and Nikki to her creative writing students. After attending a Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) conference in Portland, Oregon, and reading the research on portfolios, we had become convinced that not only were portfolios an authentic assessment tool, but they were also a student empowerment tool, providing the students an honest opportunity to take part in the evaluation process and develop their own evaluative criteria.

Near the end of the school year as we were discussing our plans for reading and evaluating the portfolios, Carol proposed the question to our teacher-researcher group that began it all: "What if someone else besides me read my students' portfolios?" Carol went on to explain that all of her students were planning on attending college, many of them at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), and she wondered if we could ask some instructors at UNR to read and evaluate her students' portfolios. Deborah Loesch-Griffin, our teacher-research coordinator and then director of UNR's Research Education Planning Center, proposed that we meet with Lorena Stookey of the UNR English department who had been working with portfolios also. After meeting with both of them, we decided to combine our interests in portfolios by studying the possibility of using portfolios as a placement tool for freshman English at UNR.

The in-coming UNR freshmen students are placed in English 001, English 101, or English 102 based on either the student's ACT or SAT scores. The cut scores for the ACT are English 001, 1-18; English 101, 19-28; English 102, 29 and up. The cut scores for the SAT are English 001, 200-399; English 101, 400-599; English 102, 600-800. How accurate are these tests in predicting placement? There were times when we thought that our students were better writers than their placement scores indicated. But were they? Furthermore, even the English department at the

university seemed to question the accuracy of the test scores since they had decided that after freshmen were placed according to test scores, they also be given an essay to insure correct placement. The problem with the placement essay is that it is given after the students are in classes. Students are recalcitrant about moving, particularly if it is to a class that is perceived as "lower," and sometimes there are scheduling problems which prohibit such movement. Would portfolios be a more accurate indicator? We wondered.

We formed a hypothesis: Portfolios would be a more accurate placement tool for more students than either the SAT or ACT.

By May, we had obtained a grant to begin the study to test that hypothesis. The grant enabled us to pay three university instructors who currently taught, among them, all three levels of freshmen English classes, to read and evaluate Carol's students' portfolios. The three instructors--Jim Roderick, Mary Webb, and Connie Kvasnicka--who volunteered to take part in this study were interested in portfolio evaluation, too, and were eager to read high school student writing. There was something in this study for everyone: Carol and her students would receive feedback from the university instructors, and the university English department would have an opportunity to see if portfolios worked as a placement tool.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The portfolios were compiled by students in three college-bound senior English classes at Reed High. The population was composed primarily of seniors who planned to go on to college; however, there were several advanced juniors in the classes as well. The students elect to take this course as an English credit, and because Reed offers an English Advanced Placement class, they are not necessarily accelerated seniors. The students had class rankings ranging from 4 to 303 in a class of 415; however, most were in the upper half with nine being in the top twenty. The junior students were not included in the statistics but will be discussed later. Four seniors were not reported because their ACT or SAT scores were not available. The final number of students included in the study was fifty-four.

DESCRIPTION OF PORTFOLIOS

All students were required to submit portfolios which Carol evaluated and discussed with them in individual conferences prior to their submission to the university readers.

The students could choose what went into their portfolios, but because she wanted to see how well they had internalized certain writing processes, she set some parameters. First, they were to include what they considered their best piece.

Second, she asked for a previously graded piece that they had further revised for the portfolio. The third piece was written specifically for the portfolio. The students were to select a journal entry and take it through the process to a final draft. She was interested to see how they had internalized revision strategies in the second paper and how, without formalized instruction, they would take a piece through the entire writing process in the third piece. Finally, they were to write a metacognitive letter that introduced the portfolio to the reader. Included in the letter was a discussion of themselves as writers, focusing on their strengths and weaknesses, and an introduction to each piece, justifying their choices and narrating their process of selection. Although Carol looked at the process work on two of the pieces, the university readers evaluated only the final drafts.

HOLISTIC TRAINING

Both of us were familiar with the holistic evaluation of direct writing assessment because of our involvement with the state of Nevada's Proficiency Testing Program. In scoring the proficiency tests, the state uses a holistic scale of 1-6. Because a single indicator seemed appropriate for the purposes of the study, we decided to ask the instructors to first rank the portfolios using a holistic scale before they decided on placement. That meant that the instructors, who had never been trained in holistic assessment, needed to learn the procedure.

We were able to obtain one release day from our principal to train the three readers. Even though rushed, the training went well. It was clear that we five were a working team. Previously, we had selected six portfolios which were representative of the range of writing in Carol's three classes. We asked the three instructors to read and rank all six portfolios independently and then describe each student's strengths and weaknesses. After they had done that, we led the discussion on their ranking and asked them to come to a consensus. They had little trouble doing so, and the resulting discussion proved to be the guiding force in establishing their criteria for a descriptive rubric. By the end of the day, they had written a rubric for a 5-point scale, a 5 being the highest score possible.

THE READING, RANKING, AND SCORING OF THE PORTFOLIOS

The readers took most of the next three days to finish reading and evaluating the portfolios. One reason it took that long was that the instructors wrote individual comments to the students. Two readers independently read each portfolio, giving it a score of 1 to 5. After the readers evaluated the portfolios, they checked to see if any of the scores were discrepant by more than one point. Only three portfolios received discrepant scores; those three were read and resolved by the third reader who had not previously read them.

PARTICIPANT REACTIONS

Students:

Most of the students appreciated the feedback and felt they had received a fair appraisal of their writing. Some students were angry, especially when the two readers did not give the same placement. One reader gave a portfolio a 5 ranking and a 102 placement, and the other reader gave the same portfolio a 4 ranking and a 101 placement.

Teacher:

For the most part, Carol felt reinforced. Although the readers and she evaluated the portfolios using somewhat different criteria, the correlation between reader scores and teacher scores was high (.753). She also found many of the same suggestions that she had made (like cleaning up that final copy in terms of mechanics) were also mentioned by the readers. She did discover that occasionally her grades reflected the effort the student had put into the portfolio; this was especially evident in some of her ESL students where her scores were, in a couple of cases, 2 points higher than university readers. Carol also saw cases where her scores were lower, especially where students had expended little effort. These differences in scores might be attributed to the fact that she saw and evaluated their process work. Overall, the mean score given the portfolios by the readers was 3.31 while Carol's mean score was slightly higher at 3.57.

Readers:

The UNR instructors were enthusiastic about the project. As they read portfolios, they took lesson plan notes based on the writing they were seeing. They agreed that the writing was better than they had anticipated and were encouraged to find the students using the writing process. They endorsed using portfolios as a placement tool even though they felt bogged down by the length of time it took to write comments to the students. The readers felt their student audience would care about their comments and would be receptive to their advice. One reader was bothered by the lack of uniformity in the portfolio pieces, indicating that for the purposes of placement, certain modes might be specified. Finally, they discovered that they enjoyed discussing their view of writing and its evaluation with each other after the portfolios were done, mentioning that grading papers traditionally is a lonely job with little opportunity for such sharing.

RESULTS

The correlation between the readers' portfolio placement and the ACT placement was high (.753 Spearman's Rank-Difference). The correlation was especially high in placing students in English 101. The ACT placed 38 (77.6%), and the readers placed 49 (84.5%) in 101 which is logical considering this is where the majority of students should go. Although it appears that the ACT placement is accurate for a large middle population, the results are less accurate for students at both ends of the spectrum--those placed in English 001 and English 102.

In 12 cases (24.5%) the placements were discordant. Of these 12 cases, 8 concerned the English 001/101 placement, and 4 concerned the English 101/102 placement. Of the 8 discordant in the English 001/101 category, 2 had received split scores from the readers, meaning the two readers disagreed as to whether the student should be in English 101 or 001. Furthermore, all of those assigned English 001 by the readers had low or non-existent ACT scores. That still left six students who were placed in English 001 by their ACT scores even though their work indicated that they could handle English 101.

More dramatic, perhaps, were the four discordant students in the English 101/102 placement. The two methods of placement never agreed to place a student in English 102 primarily because none of the students in this population was placed in English 102 by the ACT. In all four cases both readers agreed that, based on the students' written work, they should be in English 102. It would appear, based on this study, that the ACT is less accurate in placing advanced students.

One of the four students mentioned above is particularly noteworthy. The student received unanimous 5's from the two readers and the teacher. All agreed he should be placed in English 102 based on his portfolio; yet, he received a 19 on his ACT which is only one point away from an English 001 placement.

Conversely, a student who received a 28 on the ACT, one point away from English 102 designation was encouraged by her counselor to enroll in English 102. Her portfolio, however, had received 4's from the readers and the teacher, placing her in English 101. Based on the feedback she had received on her portfolio, she chose to take English 101. If this student is any indication, it would appear that students have more faith in portfolio placement than in ACT placement.

Although the juniors involved in this study were not figured in statistically, most of their ACT scores are now available. Their statistics appear consistent with the senior results mentioned above.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It is apparent from the results that the ACT placement is accurate for three-fourths of the population studied, but that still leaves one-fourth who were not placed where their needs might be best met. The ACT seems to place accurately those who do not need special consideration either in terms of remediation or acceleration. Although portfolio placement is not the most expedient or cost-effective method of placement, the process can detect those students who should be in English 001 and in English 102. Perhaps if we look at the findings in this light, student portfolio placement should be seen as an alternative in spite of the cost and time considerations.

We are aware that we base these conclusions on a very limited population. Certainly more students have to be studied to produce more definitive results. We are encouraged, however, that some colleges and universities are now using portfolios for admission and placement purposes.

We also see a follow-up of the students involved in the study as critical to our results. Accuracy of placement, after all, would be best determined by how well these students did in the English classes they took. Interviewing both students and their college English instructors will give us this information.

Portfolio placement may be more costly and time consuming, and the ACT does have a fairly high degree of accuracy. We are convinced, however, that those involved in the study, students and teachers alike, received benefits that cannot really be documented. The collaboration among and between students, teachers, and college instructors was rewarding and informative for all involved.

Scoring Comparisons
Portfolios vs. ACT/SAT

Edward C. Reed High School
Senior English Classes1989-90

Student Number	Test Score		Portfolio Placement	Readers' Score	Teacher's Score	GPA
	ACT	SAT				
61		410/101	101/102	4.5	4	3.93
11	22/101		101	3	3	2.98
12	20/101		101	4	4	3.07
41	20/101		101	4	2	2.71
42	18/Eng 1		101	3	4	3.20
43	28/101		101	4	4	3.93
65	23/101		101	2.5	3	3.31
13	25/101		101	3.5	4	3.08
45	21/101		101	3.5	4	3.59
14	19/101		102	5	5	3.60
46	20/101		101	3	3	2.92
147	25/101	480/101	102	5	5	3.90
410	20/101		101	3.5	4	3.27
68	22/101		101	3	3	2.32
430	16/Eng 1		Eng. 1/101	2.5	3	2.42
69	25/101	510/101	102	5	4	2.73
411	18/Eng 1	420/101	101	2.5	3	2.69
412	25/101		101	3	4	3.44
413	21/101	370/Eng 1	101	4.5	4	3.88
16	24/101		101	4	4	3.08
414	24/101	460/101	101	3.5	5	3.81
612			101/Eng. 1	1	1	1.85
17	15/Eng 1	290/Eng 1	101	2.5	4	3.70
18	19/101	260/Eng 1	101	3.5	4	3.71
19	19/101	580/101	101	4	3	3.21
110	25/101	510/101	101	4	4	3.98
614	28/101		102	5	5	3.86
111			101	3.5	4	2.70
112	19/101		101	3	4	2.81
X	16/Eng 1		101	3.5	2	2.60

Scoring Comparisons
Portfolios vs. ACT/SAT

Edward C. Reed High School
Senior English Classes 1989-90

Student Number	Test Score		Portfolio Placement	Readers' Score	Teacher's Score	GPA
	ACT	SAT				
114	21/101	440/101	101	3.5	4	3.12
615	16/Eng 1	330/Eng 1	101	2	3	3.16
415			101	3	4	2.72
115	25/101		101	4	4	3.43
117		400/101	101	3	2	2.68
118	21/101		101	2.5	4	2.40
416	22/101		101	4	4	3.01
417	26/101		101	3.5	4	3.43
418	20/101		101	4	4	2.47
419	22/101	350/Eng 1	101	3.5	4	3.74
119	15/Eng 1	340/Eng 1	Eng. 1/101/101	1/3/2	3	3.10
121	25/101		101	3.5	4	2.86
617	28/101	420/101	101	4	4	2.98
422		480/101	101	5/3/2	4	3.21
618	20/101		101	4.5	4	2.62
XX	22/101		101	3	4	2.40
124	18/Eng 1	340/Eng 1	101	1.5	2	2.56
326			101	2	2	2.23
127	26/101	420/101	101/101/102	3/4/5	4	3.85
424	20/101		101	2.5	4	3.08
426	22/101		101	2.5	2	2.72
129	15/Eng 1		Eng.1	2	2	3.02
428	19/101		101	3	4	3.14
131	14/Eng 1		Eng. 1	1.5	2	2.35
619	21/101		101	3	4	3.35
429		330/Eng 1	Eng.1	2	3	2.75
XYN	18/Eng 1		101	3	4	3.46
620	24/101	450/101	101	4	4	3.40